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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MANILA 002198

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [EAID](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: CHARGE DISCUSSES PEACE PROSPECTS, TERRORISM WITH
MILF LEADER

REF: A. MANILA 2110 (PEACE ADVISER OUTLINES STATUS OF
PEACE TALKS)
[1](#)B. MANILA 2097 (PROPOSED USG REPLY TO MILF LETTER
TO PRESIDENT OBAMA)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Chairman Murad Ebrahim of the separatist group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) welcomed the Charge d'Affaires October 16 to MILF headquarters in Mindanao to discuss recent progress in informal peace talks with the Philippine government and to express thanks for U.S. development assistance and humanitarian relief programs. In a 90-minute meeting attended by top MILF Central Committee members and MILF armed forces commanders, Chairman Murad encouraged the U.S. to move beyond its substantial development assistance to provide more political support to the peace process. While stopping short of issuing a formal invitation for the U.S. to join the International Contact Group (Ref A) in support of peace talks, he nonetheless labeled the U.S. as the "only country" that could help solve the MILF's decades-long conflict with the Philippine government. The Charge reiterated U.S. support for a peaceful solution to the conflict. The Charge also reminded Chairman Murad of the need for the MILF to take action against terrorism in Mindanao and urged him to support efforts to rescue a recently kidnapped Irish Catholic priest.
END SUMMARY.

CHARGE MEETS MILF CHAIRMAN

[1](#)2. (SBU) On October 16, the Charge traveled to Maguindanao Province, Mindanao, to meet with Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Chairman Murad Ebrahim. An honor guard greeted the Charge and other delegation members on their arrival at the MILF leadership's heavily guarded Camp Darapanan, accessible from a poorly maintained dirt trail off a main road just north of Cotabato City. Men young and old in Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) camouflage uniforms stood at intervals in formation on the two kilometer stretch from the main road to the camp's Bangsamoro Development Agency office, with guns and rocket launchers at their sides.

MILF WORKING TO MOVE PEACE TALKS FORWARD

[1](#)3. (C) In a cordial tone, MILF Chairman Murad expressed gratitude for the U.S. government's support of the peace process, embodied in exchanges of letters during the past six years with U.S. officials, and called the Americans the "friends of the Bangsamoro." In good spirits and speaking English fluently, surrounded by a dozen top MILF members

(including Peace Panel members and armed forces commanders), Chairman Murad said he looked forward to cooperating with the U.S. government to achieve peace in the MILF's homeland, but noted the MILF still had concerns about the perceived lack of political will on the part of the Philippine government, given the discouraging August 2008 collapse of peace efforts.

Still, the MILF was prepared to "maximize the potential with President Arroyo," despite her short time remaining in office. Murad said the parties expected to finalize a precursor agreement on Civilian Protection during the next round of informal talks the week of October 26 in Kuala Lumpur.

CHARGE COMMENDS PROGRESS, REITERATES STANDING POLICY

14. (C) The Charge d'Affaires commended the Chairman on recent and anticipated progress in informal peace talks and assured him of continued U.S. support for the peace process. The U.S. would stand ready to provide development support as talks move forward, the Charge said, and would provide additional assistance following a peace agreement. U.S. policy toward the MILF remained consistent with the principles expressed in the 2003 letter from former EAP A/S Kelly to MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim. The U.S. welcomes the MILF's stated willingness to compromise in their quest for peace.

MILF SEEKS LARGER ROLE FOR U.S.

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15. (C) While extremely appreciative of U.S. development aid that "gives hope" to his people, Murad appealed to the Charge for the U.S. to play a more public role on the political aspects of the peace process. However, he did not specifically extend an invitation for the U.S. to participate in a new mechanism to support the peace process, the International Contact Group (ICG), whose creation was endorsed by both parties as well as by the Malaysian government (as facilitator of peace talks) in September. "We look for a more active role of the U.S. in order to push the peace process," Murad said, noting that "the U.S. is the only country we feel can push peaceful resolution of the conflict.

You are aware of the background of the problem. The influence of America in the Philippines (is one that) no other country can match." Because of its "basic principles of fairness and justice," the U.S. owed this help to the Moro people, Murad said, citing the Moros' historical desire for Muslim Mindanao to be incorporated as a U.S. possession. Murad emphasized that development aid and political support for negotiations -- "peacemaking" -- should always proceed together in a mutually reinforcing manner. In a surprisingly frank and revealing comment, Murad expressed concern that development assistance alone, absent political advances, could "purge the insurgency" of its momentum, further demonstrating the need for development and political progress to go hand-in-hand.

16. (C) Expanding on Murad's remarks, loquacious MILF Peace Panel Senior Member Michael Mastura encouraged the U.S. to play a more concrete role and to shift its policy away from counterterrorism operations toward a policy of "peace" -- a possible reference to peace-building activities. Although he understood the framework for U.S. military support to the Philippine military in Mindanao under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) was counterterrorism, Mastura suggested the U.S. should consider a new policy focused on peace-building rather than just counterterrorism. He lamented that U.S. forces did not intervene during the year of fighting between Philippine military and MILF forces that followed the collapse of the territorial agreement in August 2008. The MILF Central Committee, he said, felt that the U.S. was playing an "ambivalent role" in the peace process, and that

U.S. support should extend beyond development assistance and confidence building measures.

U.S. READY TO LISTEN, BUT CONCERNED ABOUT TERRORISM

¶7. (C) The Charge said that the U.S. was prepared to listen if the two parties engaged in negotiations had specific recommendations on a role for the U.S. She reminded Murad that the U.S. took the MILF's commitment to peaceful resolution of the conflict "at face value," to include a rejection of terror not just in words, but in deeds, as well.

The October 11 kidnapping of Irish national Father Michael Sinnott, the Charge said, was a reminder of the need for all citizens of Mindanao to have security, and she relayed to Murad the extreme concern of the Irish Ambassador regarding Father Sinnott's ill health and need for heart medication. The MILF had a role to play in helping the situation and preventing terrorist and kidnap-for-ransom groups from exploiting the lack of security. Clarifying the role of U.S. service members in Mindanao, the Charge emphasized that the VFA provided for military cooperation between the U.S. and Philippine governments on training and support only; U.S. forces were not participating in combat operations or operating unilaterally.

¶8. (C) Mastura noted that the MILF had a clear position against terrorism and insisted that Indonesia, not the MILF, should be the target of U.S. terrorism concerns. The issue of security and counterterrorism was, after all, separate from the MILF quest for autonomy, and had more to do with the Indonesians who came to Mindanao than with the MILF. Moreover, Mastura noted, the MILF was the only rebel group in the country to have signed an agreement with the Philippine government to pursue terrorist groups, a reference to the joint Philippine-MILF policing force.

BANGSAMORO PEOPLE SEEK PEACE AGREEMENT

¶9. (C) Murad said that the 10,000 civilians and military members that make up the MILF wanted a political solution to

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the problem and placed tremendous importance on a written agreement with the Philippine government, which explained their disappointment at the Philippine Supreme Court's ruling that undermined last year's territorial agreement. MILF Peace Panel Chairman Mohager Iqbal said the MILF did not view the derailing of the agreement as the fault of the court, but rather the fault of the government's peace panel. Vice Chairman for Political Affairs Ghazali Jafaar cautioned that the biggest challenge in crafting a peace agreement would be to ensure it would be permanent, just, and acceptable to a majority of the Bangsamoro people. At present, he said, the Moro people were unsatisfied, and, as such, were not willing to give up their struggle.

ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT

¶10. (C) USAID Acting Mission Director briefly reviewed successful U.S. engagement on development projects in Mindanao, noting that 60% of U.S. development funds for the Philippines are dedicated to Mindanao, with a significant portion going to projects in conflict-affected areas. Examples of successful U.S. projects in Mindanao included emergency assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in central Mindanao, democracy, governance, and conflict resolution programs, and major infrastructure projects like the Jolo airport runway and water systems on Basilan. Responding to Mastura's assertion that development assistance programs were forcing internally displaced persons to return to communities unprepared to accept them, the USAID Director explained that U.S. programs supported the humanitarian and livelihood needs of IDPs and did not direct their movement

out of IDP camps to their home communities, which was purely a Philippine government decision.

COMMENT

11. (C) The MILF sought and received U.S. assurances of support for the peace process and witnessed U.S. willingness to hear MILF perspectives on the historical roots of the conflict. By inviting such a large internal MILF audience to the meeting -- including senior MILF military commanders -- Chairman Murad and his peace panel may have been seeking to demonstrate to their military wing that the U.S. remains focused on counterterrorism and, despite recent media coverage to the contrary (Ref B), is not engaged in counterinsurgency efforts against the MILF. Murad may have also sought to reinforce to his commanders the notion that a peaceful settlement is possible, and that they had continued U.S. support for a comprehensive peace agreement. The MILF and Philippine peace panels are expected to review next week in Kuala Lumpur their "short lists" of countries they will recommend for the ICG. While it is not clear that either the Philippine government or the MILF want us to form part of the Contact Group, the MILF was clearly eager for an active U.S. role in the process overall.

MEETING ATTENDANCE

12. (SBU) The participants in the meeting at Camp Darapanan's Bangsamoro Development Agency office were:

MILF Members:

Chairman Murad Ebrahim
Vice Chairman for Political Affairs Ghadzali Jaafar
MILF Peace Panel Chairman Mohager Iqbal
MILF Peace Panel Secretariat Jun Mantawil
MILF Peace Panel Senior Member Michael Mastura
Central Committee Secretary Muhammed Ameen
MILF Chair of the Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities Toks Ebrahim
Commander of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces Gordon Sayfrullah
Other MILF armed forces members from Tawi Tawi, Sulu, Basilan, and Zamboanga.

U.S. Side:

Charge d'Affaires Leslie A. Bassett
USAID Acting Mission Director Elzadia Washington
Defense Attache Col. Tony Senci
Political Officer Michael Pignatello

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KENNEY